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Senator Obama and Rep. Slaughter Introduce Legislation to Protect Children from Lead Poisoning

14 Percent of child care facilities contain toxic lead

Washington D.C. - U.S. Senator Barack Obama (D-IL) and Representative Louise M. Slaughter (D-NY-28) today introduced legislation in the Senate and House respectively to protect children from lead poisoning.

The Lead Poisoning Reduction Act requires that all non-home-based child care facilities, including Head Start program locations and kindergarten classrooms, be lead-safe within five years. The bill also would establish a five-year, \$42.6 million grant program to help local communities pay to make these facilities safe, and set up "best practices" standards for communities to test for and reduce lead hazards.

"Lead poisoning continues to pose an enormous threat to our children's health and safety in day care facilities and schools in Illinois and across America," said Senator Obama.

"The Lead Poisoning Reduction Act requires all child care facilities to be certified lead-safe within five years. The Environmental Protection Agency has endorsed key parts of this proposal with a rule that would require mandatory lead-safety training and certification of our schools' contractors. We must act on these basic precautions to keep our children healthy and our schools lead-free."

"Tens of millions of parents entrust the health and welfare of their children to schools and child care facilities every day, and yet millions of boys and girls are exposed to a lead level that will affect them for life," Rep. Slaughter said. **"T**

his quiet tragedy is entirely avoidable, and we have to do everything in our power to make lead poisoning and its effects a thing of the past.”

While lead paint in older buildings is a primary source of exposure, lead can also enter tap water through corroded water lines and pipes. Lead in drinking water can account for as many as 60 percent of the exposure for infants and children who consume formula and concentrated juices. Children suffer the greatest negative health impacts, since lead adversely impacts physical and cognitive development. Specifically, exposure to lead toxins results in decreased intelligence and behavioral problems, and can also lead to kidney damage, anemia, reproductive disorders, seizures, coma, and even death.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, about 310,000 children nationwide have toxic lead levels in their blood, with poor and minority children disproportionately at risk. The problem of lead contamination is especially great in the Midwest and Northeast, where 40 percent of child care centers were built prior to 1960.

BACKGROUND:

The Impact on Illinois and New York: Illinois suffers from the highest lead poisoning rate in the nation, with 20.5 percent of all reported elevated blood levels occurring within the state. Illinois' African-American and Hispanic children are at significantly higher risk levels than non-minority children.

Each year in New York State, 10,000 new children under the age of six are identified as having elevated blood lead levels. More than 200,000 children in New York contracted lead poisoning between 1992 and 2004. Children exposed to harmful levels of lead often require special education, medical care, and supervision, often exceeding \$4 billion per year in the state alone.

A National Epidemic: Nationally, lead poisoning affects 310,000 American children annually, and has been linked to serious health problems ranging from brain damage and hearing loss to comas and death.

In 2003, the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Office of Healthy Homes and Lead Hazard Control found that 14 percent of licensed child care facilities had significant lead hazards. At facilities where the majority of children attending were African- American, 30 percent were determined to pose serious risks of lead poisoning.

A lack of enforcement: Nearly 12 million children under age 5 spend 40 hours a week in child care. An estimated 14 percent of licensed child care centers nationwide are contaminated with hazardous levels of lead-based paint, according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

A report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) identified significant, systemic problems with the way in which the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) monitors and regulates the levels of lead in our nation's drinking water, including a complete lack of reliable data on which to make assessments and decisions. The GAO study found that few schools and child care facilities nationwide have tested their water for lead and no focal point exists at either the national or state level to collect and analyze test results. Few states have comprehensive programs to detect and remediate lead in drinking water at schools and child care facilities.

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